

Sunday 2nd March 2025 Practicing the Way – Week 1: Following Jesus

Mark 1 - Jesus Calls His First Disciples

¹⁶ As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. ¹⁷ “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” ¹⁸ At once they left their nets and followed him.

¹⁹ When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. ²⁰ Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Mims and I had a lovely time away last week as we got some rest and sunshine and toured some of the ancient sites in Egypt around Luxor with its famous temples and the valley of the Kings. Some aspects of life in Egypt haven't changed at all since biblical times and it was fascinating to see people working the land with donkeys and producing beautiful artifacts by hand from local stone. In one of the places we stopped there were these men crafting pots and jars out of solid marble and alabaster, and I ended up buying one which I have brought along to show you. The wonderful thing about alabaster is that light can pass through it so when you pop a candle into it, beautiful light shines through enhanced by the grain and structure of the stone itself. As I watched the craftsmen using their hand tools to shape the stone and carve out a place for a candle to fit, I thought to myself that is a wonderful illustration of what the Lord wants to do with us as Christians. As we commit our lives into God's hands, he shapes and transforms us through the power of the Holy Spirit until the beautiful light of Christ can be seen in us.



Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4:6 ‘God, who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, has shone in our hearts, so that we may be enlightened with the knowledge of the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ.’ Or let me put it this way: God has placed his light into our hearts in order that we can be lit up with the glory of Christ.

God wants to transform us, such that the light of Christ may be seen in our lives every day. This is the goal of Christian discipleship – to allow the Holy Spirit to chip away at our hearts of stone such that his light can shine right through all we do and say.

How does he do this? It is a process of Spiritual formation, which starts when we choose to follow the way of Jesus and let him shape the practices and rhythms of our lives. Where changes are needed, the Holy Spirit nudges us to start prioritising his ways over our own.

So that is why I am excited to be launching this Sermon series and our midweek sessions for Lent and beyond Easter called *Practicing the Way*. It is based on John Mark Comer’s book and 8 session course. John Mark Comer is a Pastor in Oregon who has gained a great reputation over many years for teaching that is both inspirational and practical. Instead of being formed by the world around us, we need our lives to be informed, transformed and reformed by Jesus, and this starts when we choose to seek him and follow him ourselves as disciples, or more literally his students or apprentices.

So instead of giving up something for Lent this year, please do think about taking time out to invest in not only your own Spiritual Formation, but also the spiritual life and health of this church and community of faith. You cannot grow as an apprentice of Jesus on your own – discipleship is done in community and we need each other to grow together.

We see this in the accounts of Jesus calling the first disciples in our reading from Mark’s gospel today. In the gospels Jesus didn’t just call individuals; here we see him calling 2 pairs of brothers: Peter and Andrew, James and John. Their trust of each other would help them process huge life changes and give each other courage and confidence to take the extraordinary steps of faith that would be required of them even from day 1.

If you consider it for a moment, it seems ludicrous that these fishermen brothers would simply leave their nets and follow Jesus if he were simply a random bloke inviting them to follow him. Something else was going on.

John Mark Comer beautifully explains more of the historic Jewish context and how young 'Talmidim' as they were called would jump at the privileged offer of following an up-and-coming Rabbi like Jesus, so I will leave that for this week's Wednesday evening midweek session.

But for us it is worth considering what it might mean in our context to 'leave our nets' to follow Jesus. You could think of it as the point where you are all in, willing to let go of keeping your options open such that there is a cost to following him.

Sherry Weddell's acclaimed book *Forming Intentional Disciples* suggests that this is a particular threshold of the discipleship journey based on *Five Stages of Spiritual growth*:

The Five Stages of Spiritual Growth



1. Initial Trust
2. Spiritual Curiosity
3. Spiritual Openness
4. Spiritual Seeking
5. Following - Intentional Discipleship

1. *Initial Trust*. The discipleship journey begins when someone has a positive emotional association with Jesus Christ, the Church, a Christian believer, or something identifiably Christian. Small acts of kindness, decency and integrity are profoundly important to forming a 'matrix of trust' where further exploration can take place. Barriers of mistrust need to be broken by giving a welcome or even a cup of water to the 'least of these little ones'.

2. *Spiritual Curiosity*. This is when a person is intrigued by Jesus or curious to find out more about some aspect of the Christian faith. Interestingly, Jesus' teaching method with the curious is often to raise further questions. "Why do you call me good?" (Mk 10:18). "Who do you say that I am?" (Mt 16:15). "What do you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10:51). "Was John's baptism of heavenly or of human origin?" (Lk 20:4). "Whose image is this and whose inscription" is on this coin (Mt 22:20)? He understands that the word *educate* means "to draw out" and that we learn best by figuring out truth ourselves rather than merely accepting stock answers.
3. *Spiritual Openness*. This is something of a crisis period where Jesus changes from just a concept to an actual person, who is knocking on the door of your heart. It is a moment of inflection when you realise a decision is needed which will have consequences. What we need to offer the person who is struggling at the threshold of spiritual openness is non-judgmental truthfulness, speaking plainly of the places in our own lives where the Gospel challenges us. This is what the apostles did, detailing their cowardice, dullness, and even betrayals of Christ. Indeed, they go so far as to report Jesus' own struggles to do God's difficult will in the Garden of Gethsemane. So we support one another in our struggles by modelling perseverance through vulnerability and weakness.
4. *Spiritual Seeking* – As they emerge from the crisis of openness, people become active spiritual seekers, hungry and thirsty for the things of God. This is where the seed has been sown, and green shoots emerge. There can be great joy, delight in worship, comfort through fellowship. But there are also dangers that could choke faith: The deceitfulness of wealth, or the heat of challenges, suffering or persecution. Spiritual seekers sample the kingdom of God but are still working out whether they are prepared to count the cost. Many church goers are spiritual seekers and our job as fellow disciples is to help strengthen faith, through encouragement, prayer, baptism, communion, and cultivating spiritual gifts.

5. *Intentional Discipleship* – This is the decision to ‘leave your nets behind’, which involves reordering your life around Christ, making him central to your decision making, and being transformed by the renewing of your minds. The brothers in our reading recognised the call of Jesus on their lives and they immediately started to reorder their priorities around the opportunity he put before them.

Sherry Weddell goes on to say that although reflecting on these stages of faith can be very helpful in understanding where we are, it is really important to note that these five stages are not fixed or linear. Someone can rocket to intentional discipleship, just as someone can stay spiritual curious for a lifetime. However we should also never accept a “label” without enquiring what it means, because even people who initially call themselves atheist or agnostic might admit to praying or being open to the possibility of some version of God.

In John’s account of the calling of the first disciples, Andrew and another disciple – probably John himself, were already followers of John the Baptist when he encouraged them to follow Jesus instead. So they started following Jesus around until he stopped and asked them ‘what do you want?’

That’s a great life question. What do you really want out of life?

Appropriate questions are powerful. Apparently, most people are only two “whys” away from being forced to think about why they stand where they stand on their discipleship journey.

Such “threshold conversations” can be very revealing about where a person is spiritually, and can themselves provoke the kind of reflection that helps a person pass through towards the next threshold. The more a person experiences positive conversations about faith, the more open they will be to talking about faith. And the more conversations you can have with people about faith, the more effective you will be at helping people get closer to Jesus.

Back in John 1v38 Andrew and John asked ‘Rabbi, where are you staying?’

This feels like rather a strange question, but actually it is code for ‘could we hang out with you?’

And Jesus replied ‘come and you will see!’

So, they went and saw where he was staying and spent the rest of the day with him, for it was about 4 in the afternoon.

More precisely ‘they *abided* with him that day for it was 4pm’ That word abide means to be with to stay with to remain with. It is the same word that Jesus uses later on in John’s Gospel when Jesus said

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” John 15:5

Disciples not only follow Jesus, they *abide* with Jesus, learning to become like him by being with him. John Mark Comer sums up the goal of discipleship like this:

- Follow Jesus
- Become like him
- Do as he did.

Spiritual formation is the practice of being with Jesus, such that we become more like Jesus and learn to do as he did.

It takes time and patience especially for Pastors who want to see everyone in the church thriving as loving disciples of Jesus. The Apostle Paul wrote of his anguish when things weren’t going so well: ‘*I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you*’ Galatians 4.19. But the good news is that Jesus’ promise is that he will do the work of transformation in us if we will abide with him: “Follow me, and **I will make you fishers of men.**” (Matt. 4:19, Mark 1:17)

Dallas Willard wrote extensively about Spiritual formation:

Though we must act, the resources for spiritual formation extend far beyond the human. They come from the interactive presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those who place their confidence in Christ. They also come from the spiritual treasures—people, events, traditions, teachings—stored in the body of Christ’s people on earth, past and present.

This is not about behaviour modification – it is about inviting the Holy Spirit in to so warm and light up our hearts that we cannot stand any poor substitute for the presence of Jesus. Our behaviour and obedience follows automatically as he takes his place as the light of our lives. Let’s pray for the courage to let go of our nets and invite him to come and do this amazing work of spiritual formation in us and in this church.